

# Learning from Covid-19

## Reflections from the Building Connections Fund developmental evaluation

Launched in December 2018, the Building Connections Fund (BCF) was the first ever cross-government fund dedicated to reducing loneliness in England. In partnership with [The National Lottery Community Fund](#) and the [Co-op Foundation](#), £11.5m was awarded to 126 voluntary, community and social enterprise organisations working with different groups across England. [New Philanthropy Capital](#) (NPC) was commissioned by the Department for Digital, Culture, Media and Sport (DCMS) as the evaluation and learning partner. The Covid-19 pandemic significantly impacted the original BCF evaluation so from April 2020 we adopted a [developmental evaluation](#) approach to capture and share learning.

This document draws on a series of interactive workshops with funders, grant holders and NPC staff to reflect on lessons from this evaluation. **All quotes throughout are from BCF grant holders unless otherwise noted.** We've written this for people undertaking or planning evaluations in a crisis. This may include funders and charities, or commissioning government agencies. Through sharing our experiences, we hope to contribute to the important, on-going conversation about how to evaluate in fast moving situations.

### Key lessons learnt:

1. The developmental evaluation approach helped grant holders make informed decisions during a time of uncertainty and change.
2. Co-creating the developmental evaluation design is essential, but time intensive.
3. Funders and grant holders must buy-in to the learning process.
4. Flexibility and creativity are key when collecting data remotely.
5. Feedback data is useful and practical in a rapidly changing, unprecedented context.
6. Real-time insights are useful but require the right mechanisms to share learning.

## What is a developmental evaluation?

Developmental evaluations are well suited to complex, dynamic environments, where projects are adapting quickly. Developmental evaluation is not a set of methods, tools, or techniques; there is no recipe, formula, or standardised procedures.<sup>1</sup> Rather, it presents some guiding principles as a way of approaching the challenge of evaluating social innovation. Building off the work of Patton and others, our core principles underpinning the BCF developmental evaluation were:

- Support grant holders' needs in real time (not imposing new burdens at a difficult time).
- Facilitate wider peer-to-peer learning for grant holders.
- Share findings (insights) quickly.

## How did we deliver our BCF developmental evaluation?

The BCF developmental evaluation aimed to capture and disseminate evidence and learning amongst organisations working to tackle loneliness during the Covid-19 pandemic:

- **Grant holders:** to help them adapt to changing circumstances and inform direct delivery decisions.
- **Funders and the wider sector:** to inform policy decisions and support others.

Our developmental evaluation ran between April 2020 and January 2021, with data collection between May and November 2020. We worked with three different groups of stakeholders throughout each phase: all the grant holders, the funding partners, and the 'learning cohort'. The learning cohort were a small group of five grant holders with whom we had deeper, more frequent engagement. The grant holders and funders took part voluntarily and were not paid for their time.

We conducted the entire evaluation remotely using video conferencing, telephone calls and online surveys. Monthly collaborative learning sessions (webinars to which all grant holders were invited) were a core part of the evaluation and supported peer-to-peer learning.

For more on the methodology, research questions and limitations head to [thinkNPC.org/bcf](https://thinkNPC.org/bcf)

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<sup>1</sup> Patton, M. Q. (2010) *Developmental evaluation: Applying complexity concepts to enhance innovation and use*. Guilford press.

## Lesson 1: The developmental evaluation approach helped grant holders make informed decisions

*'We are all [usually] on small projects – you just go for it, and then when you write your report you reflect back. This wasn't like that: it was more present – what are you doing and why?'*

Pandemics are complex, dynamic situations which require grant holders to rapidly reassess their activities and prioritise their time. They create an urgent need for project innovation, adaptation, and exploration.

Grant holders who took part in the learning cohort reflected on how they valued the opportunity to pause and reflect. The evaluation helped frame the pandemic as an evolving, learning experience in which their decisions mattered. As a grant holder explained, this helped them to feel *'more in control, [with] more creative responses to [their] own project'*. Cohort members applied what they were learning from the developmental evaluation to re-design their projects and used shorter feedback loops to adapt as circumstances changed.

Funders found the developmental evaluation to be suitable for the context, with one funding partner highlighting that it was a *'really sensible approach and way of working'*. However, they noted that there was limited opportunity for learning to feed into their decision making due to the pace of change, which prevented the evaluation from directly informing related loneliness funds launched during the research period.<sup>2</sup>

### Key insights for future evaluations:

**Invest in the relationship with your partners:** A positive relationship between ourselves and the grant holders and funders was critical. Trust was underpinned by openness, professionalism, non-judgmental interactions and well-defined roles from the outset.

**Arrange regular phone calls as points for reflection:** Phone calls between evaluators and grant holders were the most effective form of communication. We found they kept momentum up and allowed for more candid discussion.

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<sup>2</sup> For example: the [Coronavirus charity funding](#) (£750m, launched April 2020), [Covid Loneliness Fund](#) (£5m, launched May 2020), the [Local Connections Fund](#) (£4m, launched December 2020) and [winter funding](#) (£7.5m, launched December 2020). For the former funding stream, loneliness was a priority category for funding, and for the remaining three loneliness was a primary focus.

## Lesson 2: Co-creating the developmental evaluation is essential, but time intensive

*'We pivoted several times which proved valuable when determining which area of focus would have the biggest impact particularly when service delivery is changing rapidly'*

We began the evaluation by working with grant holders and funders to design the research together. We shared an online survey with all grant holders, met with the funders and tailored plans for each of the learning cohort members. Throughout the research we regularly met and discussed the approach with the different organisations and adjusted plans as required. Whilst this took time, the learning cohort valued this co-creating approach, and the time spent understanding the service and user needs.

We brought together the different objectives using the [five types of data](#) to systematically map the questions that the learning organisation(s) were asking, and provide a structure for the research.<sup>3</sup> The evaluation focused primarily on user, engagement and feedback data because they gave quick and early indicators as to whether grant holders were on the right path or not. Grant holders felt this structure was helpful, with one highlighting that it *'helped clarify our thoughts and bring order to the chaos'*.

### Key insights for future evaluations:

**Expect to change your plans:** It was essential that the evaluation met the needs of those taking part in it. We aimed for a completely flexible approach, often adapting plans at very short notice as social distancing measures were updated or service user needs changed. This has budget implications as work may need to be cancelled at the last minute.

**Take time to write down plans and decisions (succinctly!):** Outlining plans with funders and grant holders helped everyone to keep track of who was doing what, and when. Updating these plans as the context changed gave us a record as the research developed.

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<sup>3</sup> Read more about the five types of data in [this NPC blog](#) by James Noble. *User data* captures who you are working with. *Engagement data* captures how often and how long service users participate. *Feedback data* captures what people think of your service and what changes they would like to see. *Outcomes data* captures the short-term changes or benefits service get from the service. *Impact data* captures the long-term changes service users achieve for themselves.

## Lesson 3: Funders and grant holders must buy-in to the learning process

*'I found the data really helpful, both to inform decisions... and the reassurance that others were experiencing similar things – we weren't the only ones struggling'*

From the outset, all partners helped develop research principles that emphasised the development and learning nature of the evaluation (outlined above) and were on board with them. We prioritised helping grant holders to adapt their services to the Covid-19 pandemic.

The monthly collaborative learning sessions were voluntary webinars open to all grant-holders. They typically consisted of a mix of peer-to-peer support, and structured learning. Grant-holders shared challenges and solutions they had encountered over the previous month with each other, and NPC suggested some structured ways to approach these challenges, primarily through the purposeful use of data. Usually, the key challenge heard from each session informed the topic of the next session, which allowed the discussion to be driven by the needs of grant holders.

The funders did not attend the collaborative learning sessions because it ran the risk of inhibiting frank discussions in which grant holders could share concerns or problems. In place of their attendance, we wrote up the synthesised discussion notes, not attributing details to any specific grant holders. Funders found the summaries of the sessions useful. One funder explained that it allowed you *'to get a sense of key issues from grant holders'* as the evaluation ran independently from the more formal grant monitoring this allowed for *'real time'* insights.

### Key insights for future evaluations:

**Develop and apply research principles:** Developing a shared understanding of the evaluation approach between ourselves, the funding partners and the learning cohort helped to manage expectations in a changing environment.

**Be clear about the purpose of different data collection activities:** Data collection with the learning cohort served to inform both service development and the wider evaluation of the fund. Being clear about the priority for each data collection activity was critical to getting the most useful insights.

**Build capacity and ownership of the research process among grant holders:** Grant holders were supported to think evaluatively. This helped them to think critically about data they already held and how data collection could support decision-making within their organisation.

## Lesson 4: Flexibility and creativity are key when collecting data remotely

*'What works face to face won't necessarily work remotely... we learned to collect data in multiple ways and through a variety of mediums to increase accessibility'*

Social distancing meant all data was collected remotely. Learning cohort members quickly identified the importance of flexibility when collecting data in this situation. They used a multi-pronged approach to reach service users, including online and postal surveys, observations, Zoom and phone focus groups, and one-to-one calls.

It was difficult to engage some service users with formal or time bound data collection. The biggest barriers were digital exclusion, limited time and competing priorities. The latter was especially true of those most affected by the pandemic such as families with unwell children and young people who have experienced care.

Learning cohort members went to great lengths to engage their service users, because they were concerned about excluding those who were the most vulnerable. Informal conversations, targeted phone calls and social media revealed insights into service users' needs. Some grant holders had the means to offer financial incentives for participation in research activities – for example by offering vouchers. However, this had limited success and did not seem to increase engagement. The contributions of those who were not incentivised in this way were no less meaningful.

### Key insights for future evaluations:

**Provide a dedicated budget to cover time costs:** Many grant holders struggled to find time to join the learning cohort, and remote data collection was resource intensive. Funding time costs could support greater engagement from grant holders, increase the quantity and quality of data, and allow wider, more diverse representation especially among 'hard to reach' groups.

**Provide tailored support to match partners' needs:** Grant holders differed in their previous experience of data collection and evaluation, and their capacity to engage. Providing several ways to engage allowed us to maximise learning while minimising the burden on grant holders.

**Establish adaptive informed consent processes:** All participants provided informed consent around collecting and using their data. This prevented us from using informal feedback as there was no mechanism to accommodate it. An informed consent processes that recognised the value of informal data would be of great value

## Lesson 5: Feedback data is useful and practical in a rapidly changing, unprecedented context

*'We get considerable anecdotal feedback during phone conversations which we didn't previously record but we do now keep a note to support future evaluation'*

Traditional evaluations often focus on measuring outcomes and impacts to inform delivery of future projects or funding decisions. This long-term perspective can make it difficult to motivate or engage grant holders, especially when their involvement is voluntary and unpaid.

Our developmental approach revealed the importance of feedback data for informing practice. This was a significant shift; some grant holders had not thought of feedback as 'data' before. However, learning cohort members remarked that quick, accessible, and responsive data collection *'has been vital in order to make data informed decisions quickly'*. The short learning loops, and agile approach have allowed grant holders to tailor data collection directly to inform their next steps.

Learning cohort members found this shift useful and energising. For example, highlighting that the approach was helpful for *'really challenging what we needed and why, made collecting and using data feel so much more manageable and meaningful. And, dare I say it, more exciting?!'* Grant holders recognised that whilst the data they were collecting was not perfect, it was the best available which made it 'good enough' to inform their decisions.

### Key insights for future evaluations:

**Consider what information is already being collected:** Throughout the evaluation, grant holders realised they were already collecting data but neither reporting on it nor using it systematically to develop services. By building on existing work, we were able to identify what was missing and focus only on collecting data that would be useful to make informed decisions.

**Make sure you can use all the data you collect:** With the move to remote data collection and so much uncertainty, grant holders gathered insights via informal conversations. The difficulty in systematically recording this data made it hard to feed into service development. Some grant holders introduced reflection forms for facilitators to capture this information.

**Explain why you are collecting the data:** Being explicit about how data collection fed into service development and improvement empowered service users, thereby motivating them to take part.

## Lesson 6: Real-time insights are useful but require the right mechanisms to share learning

*'In a rapidly changing and uncertain environment the ability to collect rapid feedback has been vital in order to make data informed decisions quickly'*

Our research principles emphasised the development and learning nature of the evaluation. For example, the monthly collaborative learning sessions supported peer-to-peer learning across the fund in real-time. Grant holders valued the opportunity to share their current thinking, and to see who was tackling similar challenges. As a grant holder explained they were useful *'to learn from mistakes or successes [of others and] fine tune our own processes'*. In the first months of the pandemic, we developed an ['Emerging Tips'](#) document. This was shared as a live editable Google Doc. We also set up a shared Google Drive to which we regularly uploaded key insights, tools and slides from collaborative learning sessions. Whilst these initiatives gave opportunities to contribute, there was no online space that all grant holders could access and use for collaboration. The National Lottery Community Fund grant holders could access a Slack forum; but Co-op Foundation grant holders were unable to because they did not have the necessary data sharing agreements in place. We tried to create a shared online space by setting up an NPC Labs BCF page, this would have had the additional advantage of sharing emerging insights with the wider sector. Unfortunately, as it was public, DCMS, as do all government departments, required all research findings to go through an internal review process which included sighting ministers. This took time so did not lead to rapid dissemination.

### Key insights for future evaluations:

**Invest in accessible online platforms for collaboration:** Grant holders valued the opportunity to collaborate and share learning. An online platform, accessible to all grant holders, where they could interact and learn from each other would help supported adaptation.

**Develop mechanisms for rapid dissemination throughout the evaluation:** In a rapidly evolving context, learning from the evaluation would have been useful to share more widely in the sector<sup>4</sup>. However, traditional sign-off processes made this challenging. Future developmental evaluations should include opportunities to continuously share feedback from the outset.

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<sup>4</sup> For example, the practical tips on safeguarding that emerged from the first collaborative learning session in April 2020 or the considerations about blending online and offline models of service delivery that were discussed in the July 2020 collaborative learning session.



## **Final evaluators' thoughts**

In March 2020 when we embarked on a developmental evaluation, we were keen to use a research approach that facilitated peer-to-peer learning in real time. With no precedent, grant holders themselves needed to quickly develop solutions to the challenges they were experiencing. We hoped that sharing these emerging insights would enable the grant holders to build off each other's experiences; testing and adapting to meet the needs of their specific users.

Fortunately, as this note has highlighted, grant holders and funders have found the evaluation useful. It presented opportunities to gather insights and share learnings amongst BCF grant holders that might not have been possible otherwise. We have worked with grant holders to tailor our support and focus on collecting data that was helpful for them to make upcoming decisions.

We have three final reflections to share around engagement with grant holders, undertaking developmental evaluations remotely, and the use of developmental evaluations with diverse grant holders, that we hope are useful for future researchers and funders.

### **Engaging grant holders**

Unfortunately, not all grant holders were able to engage with the evaluation. This was not an issue unique to the developmental evaluation; when working with grant holders before the Covid-19 pandemic this was also the case. Typical barriers to engagement across BCF grant holders included limited time, or practical reasons why it would not be of benefit to the grant holder (e.g. pre-existing internal monitoring mechanisms). The question of time was compounded during the pandemic as staff had greater workloads and were under increased pressure due to team absences because of caring responsibilities, furlough and staff illness.

This paper proposes a number of lessons learnt that future funders might wish to consider to increase engagement. For example, providing a dedicated budget to cover time costs, establishing adaptive informed consent processes, and providing tailored support to meet grant holders need.

### **Remote developmental evaluations**

In a developmental evaluation, the evaluator is 'embedded' within the delivery team and works with the team on an ongoing basis. Through this relationship it is possible to provide feedback on a continuous basis, rather than simply providing recommendations at the end of the evaluation. This was best demonstrated through our work with the learning cohort who we were in regular email and phone contact with, and who were more frequent attendees to the collaborative learning sessions. Through these communications we were able to discuss and refine their own reflections, as well as share salient insights from other grant holders. The size of the delivery teams of the

learning cohort were fairly small, ranging between one and four members of staff. As a result, based on feedback from the learning cohort, and our own observations, the addition of an 'embedded' evaluator had more of a difference than if the grant holder had a large team.

However, the remote nature of the evaluation encouraged us to reflect if we were adequately 'embedded' within the learning cohort organisations. In particular, due to the rapidly shifting situation, plans sometimes changed significantly at the last minute. Because we were not physically present; we couldn't just hear about them in passing and as such updating us was an additional step for busy grant holders. Future remote evaluations may find it useful to allow additional resources to increase coordination, such as shared calendars or daily calls.

Finally, one advantage of remote evaluation was that it allowed for a geographical spread of grant holders without any additional costs or travel time. This benefit may mean it is advantageous to undertake remote evaluations, even when the Covid-19 pandemic subsides, and this may be a useful area for future investigation when commissioning research.

### **Developmental evaluations with diverse grant holders**

BCF grant holders were a diverse group. Whilst their projects were seeking to prevent or reduce loneliness, they targeted a wide range of different people (age, characteristics, gender etc.), delivering very different types of services and in different contexts. During the initial stages of the Covid-19 pandemic (March-June 2020) grant holders were adapting their programmes in similar ways, namely to move to remote service delivery, and learning was shared during collaborative learning sessions.

However, as the pandemic progressed, and the reflections from grant holders became more nuanced, the learning was less transferable amongst the group (e.g. successful ways of engaging young people in Zoom support groups was not of immediate use to other grant holders who were posting activity packs to older people). Had we had the time or foresight it may have been beneficial to work in a more focussed way with different clusters of grant holders who shared similar target groups of service users or who were providing a similar type of service.

It has been a privilege to work alongside BCF grant holders and funders on this developmental evaluation, and we hope that this reflections paper is useful to inform future research.